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SUBJECT: BAHRAIN REACTS TO PRESIDENT'S POLICY ADDRESS ON IRAQ

REF: STATE 3592

Classified By: Ambassador William T. Monroe for reasons 1.4 (b) and (d)

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¶1. (C) In the Foreign Minister's absence, the Ambassador January 11 met with MFA Assistant Under Secretary for Coordination and Follow Up Shaikh Abdul Aziz bin Mubarak Al Khalifa to discuss the President's policy address on Iraq. Drawing from reftel background information, the Ambassador stated that the surge of military forces in Iraq had been widely covered in the press, but this was just one aspect of the new way ahead. The U.S. would also devote energy and resources toward improving the political and economic situation in Iraq. The Ambassador described the plan to expand the presence of Provincial Reconstruction Teams in the country, increase funding for community-based projects and microcredit programs, and engage closely with partner countries through the International Compact with Iraq and the GCC Plus Two mechanism.

¶2. (C) Shaikh Abdul Aziz's immediate reaction was, "This is what I've been saying all along!" He said it was a good plan and that, while the troop surge had attracted the most press attention, "there is a lot more here." He welcomed any new ideas to find a solution to the Iraq situation. A change of policy to improve the lives of the Iraq people will have the "full, full" support of Bahrain as a country and the rest of the Arab world. The idea of regime change was to offer a better life for the Iraqi people. Due to an unforeseen deterioration in the security situation, the U.S. had not been able to offer that to Iraqis in the past. Now, for the first time, we have come to a point where the U.S. has crossed the first hurdle to stabilize the situation enough to offer a better life for Iraqis.

¶3. (C) Shaikh Abdul Aziz continued that the issue of sectarianism was an important element that could jeopardize the good intentions of the U.S. and the region. To preserve peace, we must (1) demonstrate for Iraqis that they have something to lose, and (2) witness a show of force by Iraqi security forces. In conclusion, he said it is time to give the Iraqi government the responsibility for providing security while supporting and giving opportunities to the Iraqi people.

¶4. (SBU) Although the speech was delivered too late locally to allow for editorial reaction in the country's newspapers, one columnist, in anticipation of the policy address, presented a view different from that of Shaikh Abdul Aziz. Walid Noueihed, a columnist at Arabic daily Al Wasat, January 11 described the new strategy as a way to renew the occupation of Iraq by increasing the number of American forces there. He added, "Let's face it! How could this one-year strategy heal all the wounds and resolve all the sectarian divisions created by the old strategy just by

increasing the number of forces? Correcting the situation in Iraq requires the end of the occupation and liberating Iraq and not a new strategy based on re-occupying the country."

¶15. (C) Comment: While Shaikh Abdul Aziz's comments are positive and encouraging, we note that just two days earlier, Crown Prince Shaikh Salman, in a meeting with representatives of the CNO Executive Panel, reiterated a theme he has stated often -- that the U.S. should draw down its troops to a 50,000-member rapid-reaction force that is based outside of Iraq's population centers.

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